Conversation Classes or Discussion Classes: Which Do We Teach?

By William Bickerdike

The term *conversation* class has always puzzled me. In the context of a typical language school, it suggests that what takes place during class time is indeed a conversation, and perhaps even implies that conversation is actually being taught.

Nothing could be further from the truth! If we pause to consider some of the characteristics of conversation, we soon realize that a conversation class cannot by definition exist.

- Conversations have a small number of interlocutors. In the local corner shop, for example, or over the garden fence, the number is usually not greater than two. Having made this rule, let's break it immediately. At a dinner party you may find eight interlocutors conversing together on the same topic; but for the greater part of an evening, guests from a British cultural background invariably converse on different topics in groups of two or three.
- The topic of the conversation is chosen by one of the interlocutors, never prescribed by an outside agent (Richards and Schmidt 1983). Imagine your other neighbor asking you to discuss the pros and cons of raising local taxes and improving the bus service, as you hang out your washing!
- The language of a conversation is typically 'interactional' (Brown and Yule 1983:23). It is about showing someone that you wish to be on friendly terms with them; it does not have to impart new information.

If we consider the teacher's role in a conversation class, we must also come to the conclusion that the teacher is not in any sense attempting to teach conversation. Perhaps the teacher simply arouses interest in a topic, preteaches vocabulary, sets a task, monitors performance, and gives feedback on the use of structure and lexis. And occasionally, there may be some teacher input on how to interrupt or to close a conversation politely. But this kind of emphasis switches the focus to how to converse in certain social contexts-a suitable topic perhaps for businessmen clinching important deals, diplomats at crowded conferences or even (but how often?) advanced students of English (Wiriyachitra 1994).

Let's Discuss This!

The term *discussion* class is more satisfactory as it gives a much more accurate idea of what happens during class time. It suggests that the class as a whole (but not necessarily working as a whole) will be involved in the discussion of a single topic, chosen perhaps by negotiation, or by teachers exercising a time-honored prerogative.

Just as the three crucial factors in the construction of a new hotel are *location, location, and location* , so are the three crucial factors in a discussion *topic, topic, and topic* . Put yourself in the learner's position: Which topics are of sufficient intrinsic interest to spark animated discussion, possibly with comparative strangers, for at least forty-five minutes on a wet Wednesday afternoon? Not, I would hazard a guess, a discussion of the role of computers in society today, however skillful your teacher may be at providing appropriate tasks.

In classes with a heterogeneous composition, topics should stretch across cultural boundaries. They should appeal to the young and old alike. They should be relevant to both sexes. Books with prepared topics and tasks do exist, but rarely offer a range of consistent excellence.

Why Are We Discussing This?

It is sometimes easy to give a robust and convincing answer to this question, should it be asked by a student. For example, intermediate students, sometimes do not have a very precise understanding of words relating to familiar concepts and some discussions can probably be justified in terms of vocabulary acquisition alone.

In Britain, foreign students can hold discussions in pubs and cafes, but it is only in class that they can receive lucid presentations and carefully controlled practice of grammar. Psycholinguistics can provide further answers.

Whenever an item of linguistic input becomes noticeable, one of the first steps in the process of acquiring that item has occurred. *Noticing* (O'Malley and Chamot 1990) is a conscious process, aided by the teacher who may be instrumental in deciding which items to make especially salient. The provision of activities which gradually decrease control over the learner is underpinned by the psycholinguistic notion of *proceduralisation*.

Language learners, just like student drivers, need opportunities to implement their knowledge and skills under conditions which allow more and more autonomy. A language user struggles to combine aspects of language such as recall of lexis, correct application of syntax and correct pronunciation, in the same way that a student driver struggles to coordinate the various controls necessary to drive a car.

The quick and effective deployment of communication strategies (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991) is another aspect of proceduralisation. As the learners' linguistic resources increase, so do their ambitions, though the disparity between what they can say and what they want to say may always remain. Being able to compensate for linguistic deficiencies by using a substitute word for the one intended, by paraphrasing, or by restructuring, is all part of the process of achieving competence in speaking.

To Summarize...

It is through discussions that many teachers provide their learners with opportunities to improve their fluency skills: the swift recall of appropriate lexis, the fluid formation of correct tenses, and the effective use of communication strategies. In certain circumstances, conversational analysis may be appropriate, but above all else, topic is to learner as gun is to soldier: without a stimulating topic, engagement will be desultory at best.

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